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Ho, Ming-sho: Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement

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Book Review

Ho, Ming-sho: *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019; 269 pp. with notes, references, and index, ISBN 978-1-4399-1707-7.

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The book under review explores the emergence of two recent non-violent, student-led protests in Asia – a region that seemed long immune to such events – triggered by China's expansionistic might and growing influence over Hong Kong and Taiwan. In particular, the book focuses on the underlying dynamics that can explain *how* such protests could take place in two culturally conservative societies and *why* these movements finally ended with very different outcomes. The author, a renowned sociologist with a deep-seated expertise in the field of social movements in Asia, focuses on the complexities of the changing relationship between state and civil society in Taiwan and Hong Kong using social movements as a lens. The two case studies are based on original fieldwork and provide readers with useful information about societies where contentious politics is growing in importance.

Comprising an introduction, seven chapters and a brief conclusion, this book is divided into six main thematic areas, or puzzles, which the author tries to solve. The first centres on the changes that prompted citizens' support of illegal acts of occupation; the second examines the motivations behind the protesters' choice of taking to the streets, linking it to the understanding that something vital, namely “democratic freedom” and “individual liberties” were actually at stake; while the third sketches the profile of the student leaders which emerged as indisputable figureheads of both movements, side-lining more established politicians.

The fourth puzzle addresses the differences in the availability of resources for protesters in both places; the author shows that possessing abundant financial reserves does not automatically equate into higher rates of success. The fifth puzzle attempts to explain the ability to generate spontaneous responses among participants of the two protests while the sixth analyses the relationship and ultimate schism between the two movements and political opposition parties, in light of the different outcomes.

Underlying the book are several important questions that Professor Ho seeks to answer: what are the specific conditions which allowed the two movements to

emerge; did Chinese political culture and traditional scripts play a role in these protests; to which degree did the two movements incorporate elements from youth popular culture that made the protests unique; and how do the Sunflower and Umbrella movements fit into the narrative of peripheral threats challenging the centre and its mandate of heaven (hence, the title to the book).

At the start of his analysis, Ming-sho Ho contextualizes the issue under research by briefly analysing the origins, processes, and consequences of Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement.

The analysis in Chapter 1 starts by detailing the historical background of Taiwan and Hong Kong and their common positioning at the periphery of competing empires and forces. Ho studies the two places in light of their common experiences; undergoing colonialism for prolonged periods, followed in both cases by the resumption of Chinese rule. Chapter 2 deals with the growth of the "China Factor" and its influence over both Hong Kong and Taiwan, creating a closely-knit web of relationships between the business elites of Taiwan and Hong Kong with those in the Mainland as well as a backlash to this, prompting the surge of nativist movements advocating for a distinct "Taiwanese" or "Hongkongers" identity.

Chapter 3 deals with the contexts that generated the two protests and the interpersonal connections between youth activists, while Chapter 4 and 5 form the bulk of the book and analyse in detail the outburst and subtleties which characterize the Sunflower and Umbrella Movements underpinning a sense of urgency and fear of imminent threat as the main causes for the eruption of said protests.

In so doing, Ho eerily foreshadows the protracted deadlock with the authorities that would ensue in Hong Kong in June 2019, credited by some commentators as having altered the dynamics of Taiwan's 2020 presidential elections. In fact, Ho manages to outline the contours of a recurrent pattern of power-abuse whereby authorities deal with protesters in a non-transparent manner, eliciting a sense of urgency among the people for the protection of their rights.

Chapter 6 studies the spontaneous and voluntary contributions and decision-making processes of grassroots participants, characterised as "improvisation" and "strategic response without prior planning". The author, however, goes further in his analysis by demonstrating that, contrarily to widespread beliefs, improvisation can also be a hierarchical process, structured and conflict-prone, due to the different positions and ideological tendencies of those involved. Chapter 7 analyses the consequences and outcomes of the protests, which in both places led to new political constellations. Even though the two movements stirred youthful political participation, Hong Kong's political opposition became fractured with the entrance of political contenders while

simultaneously facing increasing repression, whereas Taiwan's activists enabled the peaceful regime-change in 2016.

In the concluding chapter the author utilizes the protests to enrich and expand social movements' theories and studies, which leads him to the formulation of three methodological suggestions. First, the subchapter *Embedding Mobilization Research in a larger Context of Social Change*, locates the origins of the movements into a larger context of societal change; one in which Mainland China's expanding influence has triggered multiple contradictions and anxieties in both Taiwan as well as Hong Kong. Subchapter *Extending the Observation to Include the Post-mobilization Period* continues the observation in regard to societal changes in the aftermath of these protests, testifying to the enduring legacy of the movements. Once again, the author has correctly prophesized that the movements were not over and that sentiments of injustice would rekindle defiant protests towards the authorities; this is precisely what happened in Hong Kong after the S.A.R. government's proposal to pass an Extradition Bill with China in June 2019, making this book a must read for anyone interested in understanding the current political situation in Greater China. *Reconnecting Protests and Institutional Politics* finally addresses why it is important to consider social movements and institutional politics as deeply intertwined and as affecting each other, breaking the tradition of focusing either on political processes and elections (as do political scientists) or on protests behaviours (as do sociologists) as two distinct and separate developments.

In the final part of the book the author reflects on China's ascendancy and impact on the rest of the world, underlying the importance of civil society's protests in Hong Kong and Taiwan in light of the many limitations to individual freedom that China has in place, hampering the growth of a spontaneous and free civil society in the Mainland proper. In this changing context the author has tried to understand and situate the emergence of the two movements in what he terms as "peripheries".

Ho's conclusive remarks tie the chapters nicely together and provide a convincing theoretical framework which is able to encompass the two cases in their diversity, making his book a strong monograph which deserves to be read and debated widely. Due to the interesting and readily accessible nature of the topic at stake, this book represents a valuable reading for both experts of social movements and protests, as well as for policymakers and a more general readership alike interested in the Greater China area.

In terms of theory, the book tends to remain within the accepted conventions of social movement studies and makes little attempt to question the discipline's underlying assumptions. While it does make an original

contribution to the debate on state-civil society relations, there is little attempt to rethink the terms of the debate.

The chapters draw widely on a range of literature within the discipline of social movement studies and civil society. This literature provides an adequate framework for the analysis. However, engaging with the literature on social change in East Asia beyond the social movement studies paradigm, particularly with history and critical theory, would have enabled the book to address an even broader audience.

This study is important because it contributes to the body of work on changing State/society relations and contentious politics, studying how citizens cope with two different political systems, and why the local populace fears that their autonomy is being eroded by China, a country that allows only limited action in regards to individual grievances of various nature.

Ho's book shows very well how grievance is not just a by-product of economic inequality (as the PRC narrative would like us to believe in the case of HK) but first and foremost perceived as political inequality and political freedom and justice. Protesters are thus found to be rational actors driven by their will to reject adverse conditions for fear of the future, if they do not stand up to power.